**First Reading Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18**

*In the Near East, covenant means “agreement” or “alliance.” It describes relationships and is the primary word used to characterize the relationship between God and Israel. By delivering Israel, God has already begun the relationship. Joshua calls upon the people to respond.*

1Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. 2aAnd Joshua said to all the people, 14“Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. 15Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” 16Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; 17for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; 18and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.”

**Psalm 34:15-22**

15The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and God’s ears are open to their cry. 16The face of the Lord is against those who do evil, to erase the remembrance of them from the earth. 17The righteous cry, and the Lord hears them and delivers them from all their troubles. 18The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those whose spirits are crushed. 19Many are the troubles of the righteous, but the Lord delivers them from everyone. 20God will keep safe all their bones; not one of them shall be broken. 21Evil will bring death to the wicked and those who hate the righteous will be punished. 22O Lord, you redeem the life of your servants, and those who put their trust in you will not be punished.

**Second Reading Ephesians 6:10-20**

*Like a general giving a rousing speech to troops before battle, this letter closes by calling on Christians to be equipped for spiritual warfare against evil. The full armor of God includes truth, righteousness, peace, faith, the gift of salvation, and the word of God inspired by the Spirit.*

10Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. 11Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. 13Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. 14Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. 15As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. 16With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. 18Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. 19Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, 20for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

**Gospel John 6:56-69**

*The “hard saying” that offends Jesus’ disciples is his claim that his followers must eat his flesh and drink his blood. The followers who return to their old lives know something about how odd this sounds. Simon Peter, on the other hand, knows something about the scarcity of living, gracious words. He asks the most important question: “To whom shall we go?”*

Jesus said, 56“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” 59He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. 60When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” 61But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? 62Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. 65And he said, “For this reason I

have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.” 66Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. 67So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” 68Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

**Sermon**

Bread…week 5. We are in the fifth and final week of the Bread of Life series that started at the beginning of John 6 and has brought us to verse 69, which is not the end of the chapter but it’s pretty close. But instead of talking about bread this week, I’d like to start by talking about hard teachings. Let’s start simple…think about the most difficult thing you learned when you were going to school? Was there a difficult subject or concept or practice that you just couldn’t “get”? Something you were glad to leave behind and never think have to think about it again?

I did well in academics when I was in high school. But college was a different story. I ended up doing okay but I struggled. And one class I struggled with the most was Chemistry II. It was so bad; I didn’t understand enough to do the lab work. And in the cases of some students, labs brought up their grades. Not in my case. It may as well have been a foreign language. I was so lost. So I ended up dropping the class and that’s why I have a BA in Psychology. No hard sciences for me…it was just beyond my understanding. I’m sure we all have some subject or concept that we just can’t grasp.

But now, let’s change gears a little bit. In today’s gospel passage, after all of this teaching that Jesus has done throughout these many verses of Chapter 6, there are those who couldn’t accept it, who turned away. Now, its not clear exactly why they turned away. It is possible that some couldn’t get past Jesus’ talk about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. But based on Peter’s response at the end of the passage, which we will get to later, at least some people grasped what Jesus was trying to say when he said those things. Regardless, there is something or a couple things about what Jesus is teaching that doesn’t sit right with some who had been following Jesus thus far, so they turned back.

Now, my next question to ponder is, have there been any teachings of Jesus that you have struggled with over the years? Teachings that, deep down, make you uncomfortable and if it

was up to you, you would toss that one out? We may have to make some distinction between teachings of Jesus and teachings of the church because sometimes we as churches make up some of our own rules. But have there been any teachings specific to Jesus that you’ve struggled to accept? Teachings like loving your enemies…like honoring your parents, particularly if your parents were abusive…like forgiving and turning the other cheek…like the fact that, as the Messiah sent by God he’d have to die at the hands of human beings.

The truth is, we have probably all wrestled with some teaching of Jesus. If we haven’t, maybe we’d better take a closer look! But we can certainly empathize with those who struggled with Jesus’ teaching in today’s gospel passage. Today’s passage is actually the reminder that we need once in a while that sometimes the teachings of Jesus and what Jesus represents may actually be off-putting, even offensive. I’ve sometimes gotten caught up in this idea that, since Jesus is God’s love in-the-flesh, humanity should automatically be drawn to Jesus, drawn to this love. But that is not the case in the gospels. And it’s not the case today.

But let’s not jump too quickly to discussing how non-believers are offended by Jesus. The people in today’s gospel were people who had been listening to and following Jesus. There was just something at this point that they just couldn’t get passed. The truth is, its not just the non-believers of the world who are put off by who Jesus is and what Jesus represents. We just talked about it a bit ago…we and many other people of faith often struggle with Jesus’ teachings. We are not always so readily willing to embrace everything Jesus represents.

John’s gospel is quite focused on individuals making a decision to be in relationship with Jesus or not. It doesn’t exactly make space for a more nuanced faith in which, there is a wrestling the teachings of our Lord even as we rely on our relationship with God through Christ to help us see, to help us understand, to help us believe in the way of eternal life that Jesus extends, not only through his death and resurrection but also through his interactions with humanity and his teachings.

When Jesus talks about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, he is talking about a relationship in which we take in, we internalize the ways of Jesus, not only the love that God through Jesus demonstrated for us on the cross but also the importance of the ways we view and relate to one another. There is, however, space in this relationship to wrestle with what is hard. There is no reason to walk away. When Jesus asked the 12 if they would turn back too,

the answer wasn’t, “Oh no, we understand everything perfectly and are perfectly on board.” The answer from Simon Peter was, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Peter knew that Jesus was the only one who was the source of what he needed. This wasn’t about knowing and understanding everything, but it was knowing the most important thing…Jesus was life. That life couldn’t be found anywhere else. Period. When we know that Christ’s relationship with us is the most important thing, we can wrestle with what is challenging, what makes us uncomfortable while cling to Christ, relying on God’s love and mercy.

There may be subjects we struggled with in school that we never want to deal with again. But when it comes to the ways and teachings of Jesus, we don’t have to give up, walk away just because it challenges us, unsettles us. Rest first in the promise that our Lord Jesus has come for the purpose of inviting us into life-giving relationship with God that cannot be found anywhere else. Then, in relationship with Christ, with the guidance of the Spirit, we can wrestle with what challenges us for the rest of our lives. Amen.

**FALL IS IN THE AIR**

A close up of a sunflower

Description automatically generated